



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

ΟΙ ΑΘΑΝΑΤΙΖΟΝΤΕΣ

(Herodotus iv. 93-96)

BY IVAN M. LINFORTH

The Persian army under Darius, which crossed the Bosphorus and marched northward to the conquest of the Scythians, passed through the territories of a Thracian tribe called the Getae. Herodotus, who relates the story of this Scythian campaign in the fourth book of his *Histories*, takes occasion to describe some of the peculiar ideas and practices of this tribe. Himself a Greek, he gives us an account of the religious ideas of a foreign people; unconsciously, therefore, he provides us with a background against which, in perspective, we may better discern certain ideas of the Greeks themselves. The information which he imparts concerning the manners of the Getae is interesting and important to the student of primitive culture. To the Hellenist his unconscious revelation of Greek instincts and beliefs is more interesting still. It is these instincts and beliefs, as they are disclosed in the historian's brief account of the Getae, that I shall try to elucidate.

At the first mention of the name of the Getae, Herodotus adds the descriptive phrase *οἱ ἀθανατίζοντες*, "the Getae who believe in immortality" (according to Rawlinson's translation). Again, a few lines below, he says, *ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον*; and Rawlinson translates it, "the belief of the Getae in respect of immortality is the following." Once more, in v. 4, Herodotus refers to the tribe again with the same words, *Γῆται οἱ ἀθανατίζοντες*.

Now this word, with its suggestion of "deathlessness," is very appropriately used in connection with a tribe like the Getae. From beginning to end their attitude toward immortality was their most striking characteristic. But the exact interpretation of the words is not without difficulty. It is easy to say, "the Getae who believe in immortality"; but how can such a formation as *ἀθανατίζειν* mean "believe in immortality"? Can we suppose that religious creeds were so definitely formulated that the Greeks had set apart a single word to convey a meaning which we, in English, with all our technical

language of philosophy, cannot express in less than three? I maintain that it is altogether arbitrary to assume such a meaning simply because, in the present passage, from our modern point of view, it seems to fit the context. The meaning should be assigned only in the light of contemporary usage.

But here a difficulty presents itself. There seem to be no examples of strictly contemporary usage. The present passage is the earliest recorded occurrence of the word; and we do not find it again until it is used by Plato. But it seems to me highly improbable that the word was coined by Herodotus to describe the Getae. It comes in a little too glibly for us to believe that this is actually its first appearance. It is employed here as if it were an entirely familiar word. The descriptive phrase is added as if it would be helpful to the reader. I cannot but believe that it had some place in the popular speech of the day, even if it did not find entrance into literature.

Two questions, then, present themselves: first, What is the real meaning of *ἀθανατίζειν*? secondly, What peculiar color was imparted to this meaning by the popular usage of the day among the Greeks themselves? To the latter question I shall return later. It is necessary first to determine what the proper meaning of the word is—the meaning which it would have conveyed to a person of Greek speech who dwelt in a foreign land and had been remote from the currents of Greek thought during the time when the word was assuming the peculiar color which I shall later claim to see in it.

So far I have only allowed it a vague suggestion of deathlessness. But we must be more precise. *ἀθανατίζειν* is a verb, in the active voice, naming, presumably, some definite action. What is that action?

The meaning “believe in immortality” is accepted for the present passage in Herodotus by Larcher, Rawlinson, How and Wells, and the dictionaries of Schweighäuser and Liddell and Scott. Stein and Macan have nothing to say about it. Creuzer-Baehr and Stephanus take the verb to mean “make immortal,” understanding this to imply a *belief* in immortality. Stephanus interprets the words *ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον* and the following passage thus: the Getae make people immortal in the following manner—they pass from life while still alive and thus are sent to Zamolxis,

whereas other nations consecrate deserving men to immortality *after their death*. In this I think Stephanus is right; the notable thing about the Getae is that they do not *die*. But it is not easy to see just what he means by "make immortal." If the Getae believed that all persons of their race passed to Zamolxis without dying, then we cannot properly say that they did anything to render them immortal.

In a number of other passages, besides the present one in Herodotus, we find the word used in connection with the Getae:

Herodotus v. 4: Γέται οἱ ἀθανατίζοντες.

Plato, Charmides 156D: τῶν Θρακῶν τῶν Ζαλμόξιδος ἱατρῶν οἱ λέγονται καὶ ἀπαθανατίζειν.¹

Diodorus i. 94: Γέταις τοῖς ἀπαθανατίζουσι.

Arrian *Anab.* i. 3. 2: Γέτας τοὺς ἀπαθανατίζοντας.

Photius, Suidas, the *Etymologicum Magnum*, s.v. "Zamolxis," *ad fin.*: ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ καὶ Τέριζοι (Τερέτιζοι Photius) καὶ Κρόβυζοι [καὶ Τέριζοι indicates that the lexicographers connected the word with the Getae also, who had been previously mentioned].

Lucian Σκύθης 1 (860): [Τόξαρις] Ἀθήνησιν ἀπέθανε, καὶ μετ' οὐ πολὺ καὶ ἥρως ἔδοξε καὶ ἐντέμνουσιν αὐτῷ Ξένῳ Ἰατρῷ οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι· τοῦτο γὰρ τοῖνομα ἥρως γενόμενος ἐπεκτήσατο. τὴν δὲ αἰτίαν τῆς ἐπωνυμίας καὶ ἀνθ' ὅτου εἰς τοὺς ἥρωας κατελέγη καὶ τῶν Ἀσκληπιδῶν εἰς ἔδοξεν, οὐ χεῖρον ἴσως διηγήσασθαι, ὥς μάθητε οὐ Σκύθαις μόνον ἐπιχώριον ὃν ἀπαθανατίζειν καὶ πέμπειν παρὰ τὸν Ζάμολξιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ Ἀθηναίους ἐξεῖναι θεοποιεῖν τοὺς Σκύθας ἐπὶ τῆς Ἑλλάδος.²

Lucian Θεῶν Ἐκκλησία 9 (533): τοιγαροῦν οἱ Σκύθαι καὶ οἱ Γέται ταῦτα ὀρῶντες αὐτῶν μακρὰ ἡμῖν χαίρειν εἰπόντες αὐτοὶ ἀπαθανατίζουσι καὶ θεοὺς χειροτονοῦσιν, οὓς ἂν ἐβελήσωσιν, τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον ὅνπερ καὶ Ζάμολξις δοῦλος ὢν παρενεγράφη οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως διαλαθών.

Evidently ἀθανατίζειν or ἀπαθανατίζειν was regularly used in connection with this Thracian tribe, and it is fair to assume that it was always used in the same sense. From the two passages in Lucian it is clear that he understood the word to mean "deify," or, in his

¹ See Stallbaum's note on the passage. He claims that the Getae *bestowed* immortality on men inasmuch as they *believed* in their immortality, and that Plato, in a characteristic way, uses the word with intentional ambiguity. But the word is not Plato's choice! It had been used several times by Herodotus and was to be used often again as a stereotyped epithet of the tribe. We cannot, therefore, insist on any subtlety of Platonic style. This is distinctly recognized in Heindorf's note.

² Fowler's translation is accurate: "in conferring immortality on mortals, and sending them to keep company with Zamolxis." But I think the English reader would get a truer conception of the Greek if he had said "divinity" instead of "immortality." Reitzius (in Lehmann's *Variorum* edition) is wrong, I think: "non Scythis modo patrium esse immortalitatem credere et ablegare nuntios ad Zamolxim."

blunt phrases, *θεοποιεῖν*, *θεοὺς χειροτονεῖν*, and to correspond, in a way, to such Greek conceptions as *ἥρως γενέσθαι*, *ἐς τοὺς ἥρωας καταλεγῆναι*, *ἥρως δοκεῖν*.

The word bears the same meaning in the following passages:

Diodorus ii. 20: *δὲ καὶ τοὺς Ἀσσυρίους τὴν περιστερὰν τιμὰν ὡς θεόν, ἀπαθανατίζοντας τὴν Σεμίραμιν*.

Dio Cassius xlv. 7: *τῷ Καίσαρι ἀπθανατισμένῳ*.

Aristotle fr. 601 (*Athenaeus* xv, p. 697a): *οὐ γὰρ ἂν ποτε Ἑρμεία θύειν ὡς ἀθανάτῳ προαιρούμενος ὡς θνητῷ μνήμα κατεσκευάζον καὶ ἀθανατίζειν τὴν φύσιν βουλόμενος ἐπιταφίους ἂν τιμαῖς ἐκόσμησα* ["If it had been my desire to attribute to him a divine nature, I should not have offered him honors at the grave"].

Polybius vi. 54. 2: *ἀθανατίζεται μὲν ἡ τῶν καλόν τι διαπραξαμένων εὐκλεία* [translated by Shuckburgh, "The fame of those who have performed any noble deed is never allowed to die"].

Philo *περὶ συγχύσεως διαλέκτων* 149, p. 427M: *ψυχῶν γὰρ ἀπαθανατιζομένων ἀρεταῖς, οὐ φθαρτῶν σωμάτων ἐστὶ γενεσίς, ἣν ἐπὶ τοὺς καλοκάγαθίας ἡγεμόνας ὥσανε γεννητὰς καὶ πατέρας ἀναφέρεσθαι συμβαίνει*. [Here we have the conception of the soul winning immortality for itself through moral perfection.]

Josephus *Antiq. Jud.* xviii. 1. 5: *Ἑσσηνοῖς δ' ἐπὶ μὲν θεῷ καταλιπεῖν φιλεῖ τὰ πάντα ὁ λόγος, ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ τὰς ψυχάς, περιμάχοντο ἡγούμενοι τοῦ δικαίου τὴν πρόσδοον* ["They take certain measures to render their souls immortal." These measures may have been virtuous conduct or simply obedience to some formal rule of life—*ἄσκησις*].

In the discussion of these passages it may seem that I am confusing the two conceptions of divinity and immortality. It is true that I am. I believe that the Greeks did so. Strictly speaking, it was always believed, even in Homeric times, that the soul was immortal, if by immortal we mean that some portion of the personality, the breath or the shadow, survived after death. But this is not what the Greeks meant by *ἀθάνατος*. A being who was *ἀθάνατος* was a being who was not subject unto death, one over whom death had no dominion. But only a god can satisfy such a definition. Therefore, if, by any process, a mortal becomes *ἀθάνατος*, it is immaterial whether you call him immortal or divine.¹

That the notion of divinity is inseparable from the word becomes still more apparent in two other passages which I have still to quote:

¹ "Wenn die Seele unsterblich ist, so ist sie in seiner wesentlichsten Eigenschaft dem Gotte gleich; sie ist selbst ein Wesen aus dem Götterreiche. Wer unter Griechen unsterblich sagt, sagt Gott: das sind Wechselbegriffe."—Rohde, *Psyche*, II, 2.

Aristotle *Nich. Ethics* x. 7. 8: οὐ χρὴ δὲ κατὰ τοὺς παραινούντας ἀνθρώπινα φρονεῖν ἀνθρωπῶν ὄντα οὐδὲ θνητὰ τὸν θνητόν, ἀλλ' ἐφ' ὅσον ἐνδέχεται ἀθανατίζειν (v.l. ἀπαθανατίζειν) καὶ πάντα ποιεῖν πρὸς τὸ ζῆν κατὰ τὸ κράτιστον τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ· εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῷ ὅγκῳ μικρόν ἐστι, δυνάμει καὶ τιμότητι πολὺ μᾶλλον πάντων ὑπερέχει.

Philostratus *Vit. Apollon.* viii. 7, p. 337: καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐπὶ τὸν Λυκούργον ἀγὼν (ἦκεν) ἢ κίνδυνος ἐκ τούτων παρὰ Λακεδαιμονίοις, ὡς ἀθανατίζοντα.

In both these passages ἀθανατίζειν means "act the god," "play the part of a god," "behave like a god," being used on the analogy of *μηδίζειν*, *σοφίζειν*, *φιλιππίζειν*. This is made certain by the contrast which Aristotle indicates between ἀθανατίζειν and ἀνθρώπινα φρονεῖν.¹

As a result of this examination of the passages in which ἀθανατίζειν and ἀπαθανατίζειν appear, I feel justified in establishing the following definitions:

ἀθανατίζειν: (1), as a transitive verb, "make immortal and divine," "deify"; (2), as an intransitive verb, "act the part of a being immortal and divine."

ἀπαθανατίζειν, obviously, can have only the transitive meaning.

Let us now return to the passages in which the word is used in relation to the Getae. We have seen that Lucian has it twice with the definite meaning "deify." Can we infer that it has the same meaning in all the other passages? We not only *can*, but *must*, if the word is intelligible with this meaning. In all these passages, excepting the three in Herodotus, the compound verb is used, and, as I have said, the compound must have the transitive meaning. I should propose, then, as a translation of the verb in all these passages, "to practice deification"; οἱ Γέται οἱ ἀθανατίζοντες, "the Getae who practice deification."

What was the method of the Getae in their practice of deification? This we do not know. The barbarous ceremony described by Herodotus evidently affected only the poor wretches who were chosen as victims. But Herodotus distinctly says that the belief was general among the Getae that they, themselves, would not die. That these people were in possession of important secrets concerning

¹ Peters' translation ("we ought rather, as far as possible, to put off our mortality") and Williams' ("but rather, as far as in us lies, to act as if immortality were our share") are, in a way, correct, but they do not sufficiently recognize the contrast between the human and the divine. Welldon's ("for a man, as far as in him lies, should seek immortality") seems to me quite wrong.

the treatment of disease and the preservation of life appears from Plato's words in the *Charmides*. It is not essential for my purpose to discover what these secrets were or to inquire by what precise method they rendered themselves immortal. Indeed, it may be that no ceremony was required to make Getae immortal; they may have believed that they possessed this quality in their own right. In the latter case there would be a slight impropriety in the phrase *Γέραι οἱ ἀθναρίζοντες*. But this would not be sufficient to justify us in taking the verb in the sense "believe in immortality," which is entirely contrary to Greek usage.

Now if Herodotus could apply the word *ἀθναρίζειν*, with the meaning "practice deification," to the Thracian Getae, and expect that he would thereby convey some definite idea to his Greek readers concerning the character of the Getae, it must be true that the word *ἀθναρίζειν*, "practice deification," was in current use among the Greeks and was applied to ideas and practices similar to those of the Getae. Let us try to discover what those ideas and practices were, among what sort of people they were to be found, and in what spirit the word *ἀθναρίζειν* was applied to them.

We are told that during a thunder storm the Getae shot arrows into the sky and uttered threats against the "god," thinking that there was no other god but their own. It has been pointed out that the god against whom they delivered their threats was not their own god Zamolxis, but the sky, the manifestation of the Greek god Zeus and therefore in their eyes not a god at all. Herodotus uses the Greek word for "god" instinctively, because that which was threatened by the Getae was looked upon by the Greeks as the supreme god. This attitude on the part of the Getae seems entirely reasonable to a man of the modern world who has been trained to belief or, at least, unconscious acquiescence in the Hebrew law, "Thou shalt have none other gods but Me." But Herodotus draws attention to this attitude as a singular view of the world. Throughout the whole pageant of his history we find Greeks and foreigners amicably recognizing each other's gods. The Greeks unhesitatingly adopt the cults of foreign nations; and barbarians constantly pay court to the gods of Greek oracles. It is Herodotus' regular practice to call the gods of foreigners by Greek names, identifying them with

Greek gods, as far as their attributes allow. The Getae must have appeared to him and to other Greeks as a stubborn and stiff-necked generation in religion as in war (πρὸς ἀγνώμοσιν ἡν τραπόμενοι); and the hospitality of Greek polytheism stands in a clearer light through contrast with this proud and unreasonable monotheism.

But if the Getae refused to recognize the gods of other nations, so did Herodotus and the Greeks refuse to recognize their god. There is no attempt to identify Zamolxis with Hades or the Chthonian Zeus. In later times, to be sure, Zamolxis was called Kronos, as lord of the lower world. But, in Herodotus' time, not only was Zamolxis not identified with a Greek god; the Greeks even went so far as to say that he was no god at all, but a human imposter who had duped the whole nation.

Now why did the Greeks hold this contemptuous view of Zamolxis, refusing him the friendly recognition which they commonly accorded to the deities of foreign races? Partly, perhaps, in retaliation for the intransigent attitude of the Getae. But mostly, I think, for another reason. The explanation is to be found in the legend which was told by the Hellespontine Greeks of the origin of the Getan faith, and which Herodotus relates in the present passage. He attached a certain amount of credence to it; but we can unhesitatingly accept it as a Greek invention. It does not tell the truth about the Getae. But it does tell us what the Greeks thought about the Getae. It is an important revelation of their state of mind.

The *truth* about the Getae, as we learn it from Herodotus and other sources, seems to be this: They believed that when a man died he did not suffer dissolution or any important change in his nature. He was thought to "go to Zamolxis," a divine being who dwelt in a cave, and later, having remained for a certain length of time in the cave, to be reborn and to continue the same sort of life he had lived before in the sight of men. In other words, if we express the ideas of this rude people in philosophical language, they held the doctrines of immortality, reincarnation, and metempsychosis.

According to the Greek *fiction*, Zamolxis was not a god, but a man and a slave. The cave, which the Getae believed to be the resort of souls on their departure from the body, was explained as a subterranean chamber in which the mortal Zamolxis passed three

years in comparative comfort. He had practiced a shrewd trick on his stupid fellow-countrymen and convinced them thereby that they would enjoy a blessed immortality. There is an implication that he had made a good profit for himself out of his sharp practice. The story includes no explicit denial of the Getan tenets. But its whole spirit leaves no doubt that the Greeks were utterly incredulous toward the pretensions of the Getae.

We need look no farther, I think, for an explanation of the absence of reciprocity between the Greeks and the Getae. The attitude of the Greeks was due to their feeling that the Getan notions about the soul were fantastic, absurd, and unworthy of the attention of a reasonable being. They chose to rationalize and ridicule this particular cult, because it involved such manifestly impossible doctrines. A tribe or an individual who denies the reality of death deserves nothing but mockery and contempt—and a *nickname*. The Getae were provided with such a nickname—*οἱ ἀθάνατίζοντες*.

Now one may reasonably inquire how this nickname came to be applied to them. There are two possible explanations: either the word was invented on purpose, or, being already in use as an epithet of some other people, it was transferred to the Getae. But we have seen that it is not an exact description of the Getae, who did not actually need to do anything to render themselves immortal like the gods. It is more likely, therefore, that the word was already current as a more accurate description of some other people unknown. Can we discover who these people were? Not certainly, perhaps, but we can at least hazard a guess.

The most important feature of the Greek legend I have not yet mentioned. The master of the slave Zamolxis—so ran the legend—from whom he had imbibed the notions which he had expanded into a system of religious belief, was none other than Pythagoras. There was so much similarity between Getan beliefs and the ideas that were popularly ascribed to Pythagoras, that the Greek traders of Ionia and the Hellespont readily supposed that the Getae had learned from the Greek philosopher. We know now that the reverse was true. Greece received an important impetus toward mysticism, with its concurrent doctrine of eternal salvation, from the Getae themselves and other Thracian worshippers of Zamolxis, Sabazios, Bacchus, and

Dionysus—πολλῶν ὀνομάτων μορφὴ μία. But this was apparently unknown to the Greeks who invented the legend; and it was only natural that they should trace the beliefs of the lower race to an origin among their own more civilized countrymen. So, in more recent times, the nobler features of savage religion have been ascribed to a long past and forgotten Christian revelation. But, however this may be, the Greeks of the Hellespont certainly recognized the similarity between their own conception of Pythagorean doctrine and the beliefs of the Getae, and from this fact we may proceed along the following line of conjecture.

The Greeks, observing that the Pythagoreans claimed to be able to remove the sting of death and insure for themselves and their associates eternal happiness beyond the grave, thereby putting on the divine and making themselves like the gods, applied to them the appellation οἱ ἀθανατίζοντες. In the same way the sects of the Baptists and the Adventists receive their denominations from the most striking articles of their belief. Then, when the Greeks became acquainted with the Getae and their customs, and discovered that among them opinions regarding death and immortality were held which seemed to be identical with those of the Greek ἀθανατίζοντες, it was only natural that this sectarian appellation should be transferred to the whole Thracian tribe.

If, now, the plain Greek thought that the Getan doctrine was ridiculous, and if he thought that it was composed under Pythagorean influence, it is not too illogical to conclude that he thought the Pythagorean doctrine itself ridiculous. If the attitude of the Greeks to the faith of the Getae was rationalistic, irreverent, and contemptuous, we must suppose that they held the same attitude, only in a more intense degree, toward the teachings of Pythagoras and his circle. The Greek story of Zamolxis' institution of the cult is given a setting of Ionian manners. Indeed, the Greeks found the Getae ridiculous just because they had previously found the Ionian intellectuals ridiculous. The tale is full of the scorn of the plain, practical man for the sophistication, the luxury, the charlatanry, the wild imagination, of the choice spirits of Ionia.

Evidently, in the eyes of the mass of the Greek people, Pythagoras was typical of those esoteric doctrines which had been propagated

from mystic cults and Ionian speculation. His dominating personality united the qualities of a mystic and a philosopher. It was only natural that the ridicule incurred by both should be heaped upon his single head. The great man is always held responsible by the masses for the shams and the perversions in the teachings of his school. There were numberless corner-cults in the Greek world, which, in one form or another, denied the existence of death. The air was full of the fancy that by going through certain peculiar ceremonies, by eating this and not eating that, and, in general, by conducting one's self in a manner altogether alien to Greek instinct, one might make that part of him which was called $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ divine like the gods, guarantee it a life after death, and even put it in the way of being reincarnated at some future time. Even some of the wise men of Ionia had played with these fancies over their wine and dreamed of a paradise beyond the grave. But the common man, possessed of common sense, the shrewd, practical Greek merchant, felt that they were all a delusion, without any foundation in fact; he could see for himself that death was the end of all; and if he needed higher authority, he had Homer and a hundred other poets to appeal to.

If my analysis of Herodotus' brief account of the Getae is sound, we can catch an echo of the controversy that must have raged in the sixth century between the devotees of the new movements in religious thought and the sensible, orthodox people, who believed no more than they could see. We find no trace of anything like persecution of these cults. Ridicule and rationalism seem to be the only weapons of the orthodox party. Mediaeval Christians would have tortured the adherents of such strange tenets; tolerant Greeks only laughed at them.

The argument may be summed up as follows:

We learn from Herodotus that the Greeks applied a nickname meaning "the deifiers" to a certain foreign tribe; that, contrary to their usual custom, they refused to recognize the divinity of the god of this tribe; that they ridiculed its religious beliefs, which denied the fact of death; and that they traced these beliefs to the teaching of their own countryman Pythagoras. *Therefore* we may infer that the Greeks popularly believed that Pythagoras denied the fact of death; that they held this denial to be ridiculous and irrational;

and that they applied to him and to others like him the nickname "the deifiers," indicating thereby that the person to whom the name was applied claimed to be able to rid men of the necessity of death and make them equal to the gods. These inferences, if true, are an interesting revelation of the attitude of the majority of the Greeks toward the mystic cults which were introduced in the seventh and sixth centuries before Christ, and which were destined to have a profound effect upon later Greek thought.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA